REVIEWS

Ch. PERELMAN & L. OLBRECHTS—TYTECA : *Traité de l'argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique.* Bruxelles, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1976, 3th edition, 734 pp, 700 BF.

This extensive work, published for the first time in 1958, redirects philosophical attention to the logical study of non-formal, so-called "rhetorical" argumentation, a study which has been neglected since the Renaissance. A new (unchanged) edition of the book is justified, as it's specifically "rhetorical" program has never been continued in the same strain, and as the social uses of rhetoric make the problem of argument of perennial interest.

The richness of the material collected in the "Traité" is impressive. Arguments occurring in newspaper-articles, in political speeches, in court-room pleadings, in philosophical treatises are gathered and treated equally from the same "rhetorical" point of view, which constitutes the originality of the work. With this point of view, the authors aim at a reappraisal of discussion and debate, activities which have been denied rationality during the centuries when an absolute Cartesian ideal of reasoning dominated philosophy and logic. They intend to produce a theory of non-formal proof, which would concentrate on the means of proof neglected by formal logic. In this theory of argumentation, the emphasis does not lie on formal validity and conformity with facts, associated with logical demonstration and empirical science, but on the efficiency of the arguments in evoking or strengthening the audience's assent to the presented theses. For according to the authors, every argumentation is directed to an audience and structured in view of persuading or convincing the audience. Even internal or mental deliberations, or argumentations either directed to a one-person audience, or to a universal audience conceived as an incarnation of reason, must be based on this model of a speaker or writer trying to influence his public.

The theory of argumentation itself then, consists of a description of the techniques of argumentation, classified according to "structural characteristics". Some examples of thus discriminated structures are : arguments based on association or dissociation of a person and his acts; arguments based on the relations between means and ends or facts and consequences; arguments based on a formal rule of justice prescribing equal treatment in equal cases, etc.

It will be clear that the main problem of the theory of argumentation concerns the theoretical foundation of these argument-structures. What criteria are used by the authors to construct their categories ? They define their aim as purely descriptive : no conception of truth or validity, no psychological or social-psychological explanation of persuasive efficiency is considered, that might give a foundation to the structuring principles. They admit that other classifications than theirs are possible and that criteria to make preferences between classifications can themselves be subject to argumentation. I am afraid that this refusal to give a non-rhetorical foundation to the theory of argumentation is untenable, because of a fundamental ambiguity in the author's concept of rhetoric. The classical treatises of rhetoric had the thoroughly practical aim of providing intellectual tools and memory-aids useful to contemporary rhetoricians. Aristotle's "Topics" and "Rhetoric", e.g., are linked with the Ancient Greek institution of the professional rhetorician; Christian writers on rhetoric were engaged on problems of preaching. This "New Rhetoric" of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca on the other hand has the rather theoretical ambition of establishing a logic, a theory of proof. Here resides the ambiguity of their "rhetorical point

of view" : on the one hand they want to revive and to continue this practical and situation-bound discipline of rhetoric, while on the other hand they aspire to the detached viewpoint of the logician, which prevents them from situating their theory within a socially and historically concrete praxis. And as the "Traité" is thus not pragmatically grounded, I think the absence of a non-rhetorical foundation leaves the argument-structures completely unfixed. Notice that I am not asking for some sort of absolute foundation of the theory. I am only expressing doubt whether the theorist can say something relevant about arguments without situating his theory with regard to concrete social uses of arguments, or even, without engaging himself directly or indirectly in the social discussions of his society (see below under 2). To do justice to the authors, we must remark that a pragmatically grounded universal theory of argumentation is perhaps objectively impossible now. For in a complex and diversified society like ours, there is not one institutionalized use of rhetoric, but there might be a multitude of mutually unreducible forms of rhetoric, each related to a particular ideological position or to a particular institution (law, politics, religion, etc.), with no common persuasive mechanisms and no shared conception of truth and validity.

Now I want to show how the ambiguity of the concept of rhetoric as to its practical or theoretical nature, creates difficulties for some other central concepts of the theory. Successively we will discuss the "principle of inertia", the "structural" nature of the theory, the belief in freedom as a foundation of rationality, and the "universal audience".

1. Although the authors want to limit themselves to a pure description of arguments, some argument-structures are implicitly based on an explanatory principle of psychological and social inertia. This principle supposes a disposition of the mind to stick to habits, to established rules, to beliefs and attitudes to which one has committed oneself. It forbids that commonly accepted opinions, agreed conceptions of the normal and the real, should be revised without justification. In this respect it tends to stabilize the argumentation, allowing it to progress from implicitly or explicitly endorsed premisses towards new conclusions. However, from an explanatory principle it becomes a normative principle of rationality when it lays the burden of proof on the side of novelty and deviance. With the basic ambiguity of the "rhetorical point of view" in mind, it is not clear whether this principle of inertia is proclaimed from the universal stand-point of the logician or whether it is a subtle device for justifying particular conservative uses of rhetoric. Does the principle really express a universal rational feature of the human mind, or is it reminiscent of Burke's rhetorical defense of the rationality of tradition ?

2. Even if the theory of argumentation itself is rhetorical, yet the authors construct their theory in a way which separates the theoretical level from the object-level. For if arguments are mainly substantial, the theory of argumentation on the other hand is intended to be formal or structural. It concentrates on that part of arguments which consists of the transition from thesis A to thesis B. The explanation why thesis A and thesis B themselves are accepted by audiences as a function of their meaning, and the determination of the possible rationality of these acceptances, are not considered to be part of the theory. Of course this exclusive concentration on the "form" of arguments is a preferable option for the theorist who aspires to the logician's viewpoint, as it is the only way conceptual tools — though rather artificial ones — can be created to talk *about* arguments in a generalizing way (without getting involved thus in the studied argumentations). But on the other hand the "Traité" points out that argumentation is essentially linked with ordinary language, of which the historical and cultural particularity is especially emphasized. As opposed to the self-contained character of formal systems, which are the domain of demonstration, not of argumentation, the authors stress the communicative and social nature of ordinary language and its links with the ways of living and thinking of a society. This opposition between generalizing and individualizing attitudes, reflective of the ambiguity of the "rhetorical point of view", stresses again the problematic position of the theorist. Can he construct a

theory about arguments without getting involved in these arguments ? Can he e.g. provide a valid description, explanation and evaluation of the fact that someone is persuaded by an argument intended to show that "he is being exploited" without investigating whether he is being exploited indeed ? Here we touch the more general problem whether the referential systems of the human sciences can be completely independent of the referential systems of the individuals and groups whose behavior is studied. Though the authors want to analyse the means of proof that Aristotle qualified as "dialectic", the fact that they are consciously avoiding the more extensive meaning that Hegel and his followers gave to this concept, shows that they believe in the detached, "non-dialectical" role of the theorist. It should be realised that as a consequence of this position, some possible rational features of argumentations may be overlooked, namely those where persuasion is linked with the improving cognitive orientation of audiences towards their social environments and towards their own identity. The artificial nature of the argument-structures in the "Traité" (artificial with regard to the referential systems of the people arguing and being persuaded), makes one doubt whether the theory of argumentation is able to grasp the historical and social importance of certain crucial concepts in growing rational understanding and reflexive action.

3. It will be clear that a short discussion of the authors' underlying conception of rationality is needed here. In a manner which reminds us of the political doctrine of the "Invisible Hand", the authors base the rationality of argumentations on a belief in freedom : the orator (or writer) is free in choosing his arguments, as the audience is free in agreeing with these arguments, and it is the free interaction of these two poles which decides of the quality of the argumentation. This is intended as an opposition to a conception which considers the coerciveness of formal demonstrations as the sole hallmark of rationality. We should wellcome this enlargement of the concept of rationality, as it revaluates the reasonings of ethics, politics, law, etc. But when no criteria are given to distinguish valid from non-valid arguments, and when it is not proven that the freedom of the orator (writer)- and audience necessarily or probably generates valid arguments, then such indefinite and abstract freedom tends to be synonym of arbitrariness.

4. Similar remarks can be made concerning another description of rationality in the "Traité"' namely where the rationality of the arguments is made dependent on the quality of the audience which is being persuaded : ideally a perfectly rational argument is one that is able to convince a real or imagined universal audience, or an audience that is seen as an incarnation of it. We must applaud this trial to bring the abstraction "rationality" down to the dimensions of the discourse of a speaker-writer and the persuasion of an audience, which are concrete social phenomena. But again, when no description can be given of the psychological and social properties of the universal audience, it remains a subjective abstraction from which no conception of rational argument can be deduced.

Perhaps a solution of the problem of argument must be sought after by broadening the enquiry. A rational argumentation and a rational social order are interdependent. The conception of a rational argumentation should be inspired by a non-formal conception of rational man and rational society. With this in mind, the search for argument-structures should perhaps be integrated with an inquiry (both descriptive and normative) into the social structures and the according communication-conditions in which both speaker-writer and audience are to be organised to ensure a rational argumentation.

By way of conclusion, we must stress the important and original place of this work in recent philosophical developments. Starting from the problem how to redefine rationality so as to include practical reasoning, it has made a major contribution to the criticism of the narrow Cartesian conception of the neopositivists, without however falling into a phenomenological type of irrationalism. Together with classics like Toulmin's "The Uses of Argument" and I.A. Richards' "The Philosophy of Rhetoric", it has stimulated new interest

in political, legal, and moral reasoning, and especially in the concept of "rhetoric". In the French speaking countries, mainly linguists reintroduced the study of the stylistic and aesthetic aspects of rhetoric (e.g. R. Jacobson, R. Barthes, the journal "Communications" nr. 16). In the English speaking countries on the other hand, and principally in the USA, speech theorists and sociologists focussed on the cognitive and argumentative aspects of rhetoric (e.g. the journal "Philosophy & Rhetoric", various studies on Black Panther and Vietnam War rhetoric, on political propaganda and advertising).

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